

Jesus: The Author and Perfecter of Our Faith

This retreat weekend study is designed to encourage you as a small group community to grow in your faith and faithfulness to God and to one another. Throughout the New Testament we are encouraged to focus on Jesus as the ultimate example of one who understands and lives a God-glorifying faith. The following Bible studies aim to help us, together as a small group, explore how Jesus not only taught us the concepts of our faith, but also—in his life and through his death—showed us the practical application and implication of our faith.

Saturday Morning Small Group

Opening Prayer Time: Spend a few minutes in prayer as a group asking that Jesus would be the center of the weekend in your hearts and minds. Invite the Holy Spirit to open your group's eyes as to how Jesus was the perfect example of both teacher and servant.

Introduction: Spiritual Reading of Hebrews 12: 1-3 (~10 minutes)

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."

Discussion Questions (~25-30 minutes):

- (1) What is your general sense of this passage, how do you receive it? Is it instructional? Encouraging? Condemning? Motivating?
- (2) From what you recall from Walter's talk, what was the original recipients' situation? What might they have been experiencing? How can we relate?

Instructions on Spiritual Reading:

Have someone read the passage through a first time and together sit in silence for at least one minute before having another person read the passage again. This time, while the passage is being read, listen carefully for a word or phrase that jumps out to you. Again, sit in silence for at least one minute.

Read the passage again, followed by silence—and in this time of silence confirm in your hearts what God may be speaking to you through His word.

Read the passage a fourth and last time, followed by a time in which you (if you like) can speak into the silence the word or phrase that jumped out to you. There is no need to elaborate, just speak the word or phrase—and then when finished move onto the discussion questions...

(3) Jesus is introduced as the *author* and *perfecter* of our faith in verse 2—how else is Jesus described in these verses? What was his experience? What was his motivation?

(4) From these verses how would you describe 'faith' and the life of faith? Is it helpful to view your life of faith as a race? If so, how?

(5) In what way is Jesus the *author* of your faith? [Note: other translations translate this Greek word as '*pioneer*' or '*founder*'. Does this nuance your answer?]

(6) Where are you on the race?

- Just starting out
- Hitting my groove at just the right pace
- Breathing hard at too fast a pace
- Looking for the finish line
- Hindered by pain and circumstance
- Weary and ready to quit
- Lost, may have missed a turn

Session One: “Consider Jesus... and Temptation”

Since we are to be fixing our eyes on Jesus while running the race of faith, we will be doing this in the following sessions together. First, let us consider how Jesus dealt with temptation to sin...

Read Matthew 4:1-11 aloud as a group

Discussion Questions (~35-45 minutes):

- (1) Observe the circumstances around the first temptation (vv.1-4). What do learn about Jesus? About the tempter? What is the temptation? [Both on the surface and deeper]

- (2) What is Jesus’ strategy when he answers the devil in verse 4? How does his response effectively reject both the immediate, physical temptation and the deeper questioning of Jesus’ identity? [Note: though it was 40 days earlier, what is the last ‘word that comes from the mouth of God’ recorded in Matthew (3:17)—how significant could this be?]

- (3) Observe the circumstances around the second temptation (vv.5-7). How is this temptation similar, how is it different? How are these differences relevant to the devil’s questioning whether Jesus is the Son of God?

- (4) How is Jesus’ response in verse 7 both similar and different to his earlier retort to the devil? What does this response reveal to us about who Jesus is?

- (5) In the next temptation (vv.8-9), the devil changes the setting and tone once again—what does this third temptation tells us about the devil and his intentions?

- (6) In verse 10, what is different in Jesus’ final response to the devil? In what tone of voice do you hear Jesus saying these words?

- (7) What is important about the final verse in this passage (v. 11)? What do we learn about Jesus? about the devil?

Going Deeper: (~30 minutes)

One of the truths of life (and especially the life of faith) is that there are events and experiences in life through which God intends to prove and improve our character and faith. Another truth of life is that our enemy—Satan, the evil one—desires to turn such times into temptations and so trip us up. This is why we pray as Jesus taught us, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.” (Mt 6:13)

- (1) In considering Jesus and his temptations, what encouragement can you take away from his victory over Satan? What, if anything, hinders you from trusting God in much the same way as Jesus demonstrated here, hungry in the desert?

- (2) What trials or trying times are you facing or perhaps anticipate, that Satan could use for (or turn into) temptation? In what ways can you prepare to face those temptations?

- (3) What practical ways could you ‘fix your eyes on Jesus’ in order to keep your trials in perspective so as to preserve your faith and faithfulness? What is it about his life or ministry seen in this snapshot on which you could ‘fix your eyes’ at this time in your life?

- (4) Now go back to Hebrews 12:1-3: How do the temptations of Jesus reinforce the following ideas:
 - a) we can throw off hindrances and sin
 - b) we can see that Jesus is both author and perfecter of our faith?

- (5) Resolve as a group to memorize Hebrews 12:1-3 this weekend, and so recite them together as group at the beginning of the next two small group meetings.

- (6) Close your time together with prayer for one another in response to the sharing during the Bible study. Consider the following prayer exercise to end your time together...

“Throwing off everything that hinders...”: Take some moments to consider—and write down on a piece of paper—anything you see hindering you in your life of faith, the race marked out for you. As a group, walk to a nearby trashcan or fire place and throw these things away... and feel free to say in your heart or aloud as you do so, ‘Away from me, Satan!’

Saturday Evening Small Group

Session Two: "Consider Jesus... and Running the Race"

Opening prayer

Spend a few moments thanking God for this time together as a group and for the people he has placed around you in this group. Offer prayers for your group in response to Walter's teaching at large group. Ask God to open your eyes, your hearts, your minds as you consider the words and life of Jesus in this study.

Recite (or read) together Hebrews 12:1-3

Opening exercise... "Who is cheering for you?"

(10-15 minutes)

(1) Share with the group, a time when people were cheering for you or coaching you or spurring you on in some way. [*This could be during a race or sporting event, or while in school, or while pursuing a goal you had set for yourself.*]

(2) What difference, if any, did that make for you?

(3) Consider the image to the right...

In light of Hebrews 12:1-3, *what* comes to mind in your contemplation of this image? *Who* comes to mind for you?

(4) In what way(s) could you use some encouragement or 'cheering on' in this season of your life? As a "cloud of witnesses" for each other, how could you encourage or "coach" one another in your race of faith together?



Many have gone before us living the Christian life as best as they understood it. The measure of living a life of faith authored and perfected by Jesus is Jesus' very own words in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus delivered this sermon early in his ministry and it is known to be one of the major events in which he distinguished himself as a great and innovative teacher. This sermon not only teaches us the elements of a

'blessed' or happy life, but foreshadows the life of Jesus as we get to know him later in the Gospels. We will be looking at six passages within Matthew 5-7:12, which is a large section of the Sermon on the Mount, but first, together as a group...

Read Matthew 5-7:12

Now one way you could do this study is to divide your group into six smaller groups each of which looks closely at one passage (or three smaller groups each looking at two passages). On the following page, we have asked a series of questions to be addressed for each passage—we've also provided a chart to fill-in answers to those questions for your assigned passage.

We have divided the sermon into these passages:

- (1) Matthew 5:1-20
- (2) Matthew 5:21-32
- (3) Matthew 5:33-48
- (4) Matthew 6:1-18
- (5) Matthew 6:19-34
- (6) Matthew 7:1-12

Instructions for this exercise:

As a smaller group, spend 15-20 minutes going through your assigned passage. Then come back together as a whole group to discuss what each person/smaller group has learned.

For each assigned passage, answer the following questions—and fill out the appropriate section of the chart

(1) What is it you have just read? Have someone summarize it in their own words... and What would you consider to be the key verse within this section?

(2) What is Jesus saying about faithfulness and the life of faith in this section?

(3) Can you think of a time in the life of Christ (or perhaps any Biblical character) where this truth was demonstrated? How about a Scriptural reference?

(4) How might this teaching be compared or contrasted to modern day values, ethics and/or actions?

(5) What is one specific way, you—as a follower of Christ—could demonstrate this teaching in your life? How about your small group?

Summary & Key verse	Faithfulness & Life of faith	Demonstrated in life of Christ	Modern Day Comparison	Personal & Group Application
Matt. 5: 1-20				
Matt. 5: 21-32				
Matt. 5: 33-48				
Matt. 6:1-18				
Matt. 6:19-34				

Matt. 7:1-12				
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Discussion Questions: (~30 minutes)

As you come back together in your larger group...

- (1) Take some time (~15 minutes) to share what you learned from each passage.
- (2) Overall, which passages strike you as the most challenging or difficult to understand? Spend some group time trying to work through understanding these difficulties.
- (3) In what way(s) did Jesus revolutionize people’s understanding of faith through these teachings?
- (4) Why do you think Jesus started off his teaching ministry with so many important directions and insights? How do you imagine people responded to this teaching (cf. Mt 7:28-29)? What kind of people was Jesus looking for to be his disciples?
- (5) Quickly look back over what you have summarized for the passages. Find two more examples from the Gospels or elsewhere in the New Testament in which Jesus demonstrates what he taught in the Sermon on the Mount. *Example: In Matthew 7: 1-5, Jesus instructs us on not judging others. How does he show how this is possible in John 8:1-11?*

Going Deeper: (~30 minutes)

- (1) Which values or themes taught by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount are found also in our theme verses of Hebrews 12:1-3?

(2) Again, back to Hebrews 12:1-3: How do these teachings of Jesus reinforce the following ideas:

- a) we can throw off hindrances and sin,
- b) we can run the race marked out for us,
- c) that Jesus is both author and perfecter of our faith?

(3) As Jesus demonstrated faithfulness and a life of faith in line with his own teaching—is this encouraging or discouraging to you in your ‘race of faith’? How so?

(4) Instead of seeing these teachings as ‘burdens’ or ‘hindrances’—how might we see them as a vital way to help and encourage us to “race with perseverance the race marked out for us”?

Prayer and Sharing Time (~10 minutes)

Thy will be done...

“The more we know of Jesus and understand what God is about in the world, the more I realize how foolish I am not to want (or pray) God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” – Rev. Darrell Johnson in *Fifty-seven Words That Change the World: A Journey Through the Lord’s Prayer*

Knowing that God’s will is ‘good and perfect,’ spend some time praying specifically for God’s will to be done in several different areas of your lives:

- Vocation
- Relationships
- Family
- Creation
- Nations
- Church

Note: Be as specific (and bold!) with your prayers as possible. Praying for God’s will to be done need not be a ‘cop-out’ or something we do begrudgingly over against what we want to be done... Perhaps it would be helpful to think of God’s will as God’s ‘design’ or ‘delight’ or God’s ‘purpose’ or ‘pleasure.’

Sunday Morning Small Group

Session Three: “Consider Jesus... and Endurance”

Hebrews 12:3 simply states, “Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” This morning’s passage is one of the most studied and most valued pieces of Scripture in all of Christianity. In fact, it may be considered the most pivotal piece of inspiration we are privileged to take in.

Prayer Time: Before you begin reading and discussing this passion narrative of Christ, pray that God would prepare all of your hearts to see it anew and with the ability to truly fix our eyes on Jesus who endured... and overcame. Spend 5-10 minutes in prayer.

Read **John 18:28-19:30** aloud as a group and then spend 40-45 minutes in discussion.

Discussion Questions:

- (1) First concentrate on John 18:28-40. Describe each of the participants. What do you know about them? What is their role in this section? What are their motives?
- (2) The Jews report that they can’t enter the palace of Pilate. Why is this? Contrast this to what you have learned about Jesus during the last two studies. How does Jesus’ view of the law / cleanness contrast from theirs?
- (3) Why do the Jews want Jesus to be judged by Pilate? What is their case against him?
- (4) How does Pilate proceed with his investigation? How does his investigation help him to learn more about Jesus?
- (5) Discuss Jesus’ responses. What do we learn about him? How do these insights support or expand what your group has learned about him in the last two study sessions?
- (6) Discuss verses 38-40. What do we know about Jesus that could make Pilate state “I find no basis for a charge against him” and “do you want me to release the king of the Jews?” Look back to previous studies or other examples in the gospels to see why it would be so difficult to charge Jesus.

Now move on to **John 19:1-16**.

(7) In verses 1-3, what does Jesus experience? Does his response remind you of anything you have studied during the last two sessions?

(8) In verses 4-7, discuss the conflict Pilate seems to be having within himself? Why do you think this is? How does the conflict deepen in verses 8-16?

(9) Describe Jesus throughout this entire section. What do his words and actions tell us about him and the situation?

(10) Look at verses 14-16. What is the relevance of what Pilate says to the chief priests? What is surprising about what the chief priests say? How does this chapter end?

Finally, move on to **John 19:17-30**.

(11) Spend some time as a group really describing the process of Jesus' final moments. Who was there? What was their role? What was the mood/attitude of each participant?

(12) What is the significance of Pilate writing "Jesus of Nazareth: the King of the Jews"? Go back to Saturday morning's passage. What is different or similar to the devil's statements?

(13) What is important about verses 25-27? See **Mark 3:33-35**. How does this again confirm that Jesus is the author and perfecter of our faith?

(14) Focus now on **John 19:28-30**. What happens here? What does verse 28 tell us about Jesus' understanding of our faith?

(15) How does Jesus' actions fulfill **Psalm 69: 19-21**? How is this important for who we understand him to be?

(16) Finally, look at verse 30. Jesus says "It is finished." What is the relevance of this in Jesus' life? What is the relevance of this for us and for our life of faith?

Going Deeper: (Take some time to work through these... ~30-35 minutes)

(1) Jesus taught and lived this truth, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” (**John 15:13**) How might Jesus be ‘perfecting’ your faith or faithfulness with this truth?

(2) Another word for “perfecter” is “finisher”. How does Jesus’ words on the cross (recorded in **John 19:30**) give further insight to the statement made about him in **Hebrews 12:2**? Assuming it is important to you that you finish well—what might that look like for you in your life? How might this group contribute to encouraging you to not grow weary or lose heart in the race of faith?

(3) Again, go back to Hebrews 12:1-3: How does the example of Jesus reinforce the following ideas:

- a) we can throw off hindrances and sin,
- b) we can run the race marked out for us,
- c) we can fix our eyes on Jesus, and
- d) that Jesus is both author and perfecter of our faith?

(4) We know from the rest of the Gospel of John and from our Hebrews passage (12:2) that Jesus—even in death—was not defeated. “For the joy set before him he endured... and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” What joy was set before Jesus? Have you experienced this kind of joy? What, if anything, is set before you that could help you endure suffering or ‘opposition from sinful men’? [cf. John 15:9-11; Php 1:3-6; Php 4:1; 1 Peter 1:1-9]

Taking it all Home: (~20-25 minutes)

Reflecting on the whole weekend, several large themes are emphasized in our Hebrews theme verses (12:1-3) as well as in the specific Gospel passages which can help us run the race marked out for us with perseverance.

Review the following summary themes and choose at least one area in which you specifically want to apply Jesus’ example and teachings into your life. Some examples are provided, but know that you should focus on what God is putting on your heart. Discuss these things in your group and initiate accountability for your goals.

(1) Refusing our temptations confirms in our minds the strength of God's perfectly authored words.

- a) What are your worst temptations? What are your weaknesses?
- b) How can you use God's words to combat them?
- c) How can you tell Satan to be gone in our life?

Example: Jesus was tempted by Satan to try to live out a powerful, successful and worldly life. How are you tempted in your work or personal lives to make your own ambitions (promotions, making more money, being known as the best) come true? How can you take action to resist idolatries and stay focused on the race set before you?

(2) Removing sin from our lives makes us able to see Jesus more clearly and follow him.

- a) List one or two of the sins that are discussed in the Sermon on the Mount that you especially struggle with.
- b) Discuss a specific way that you can make a change which would result in you being able to live out Jesus' commands?

Example: Jesus gave very specific instructions about lust and adultery. Are there ways that you don't hold yourself up to high standards in your physical relationship with your boyfriend or girlfriend? Are there ways you can set up new boundaries in order to not place yourself in the position of lust? Are "innocent sleepovers" telling your roommates or friends that you take Jesus' words seriously?

(3) Following Jesus' consistent commitment to acting upon God's truth—although extremely costly—results in being able to live a life that is focused and completed.

- a) Are there acts of obedience for you which just seem too costly?
- b) Is the threat of pain, alienation or ridicule something you just can't see being able to handle when faced with the chance to obey Jesus?
- c) Does obedience sometimes feel like it won't lead you to the end of the race?

Discuss a specific tactic for not being fearful of suffering so as to run further in the race set before you.

Example: Has it been on your mind lately to more radically follow Jesus in a new way? Perhaps quit your job and work for a local ministry? Sell an expensive possession and give to the poor? Train for missions and leave your family and friends? Commit a significant amount of time, money and care for the sick, widowed, orphaned or lonely?

End with prayer for one another to endure in the 'race marked out for us' and to keep these 'take home' commitments... (~10 minutes)